Interpersonal utility comparisons (IPUCs): Evaluative or descriptive?

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1) Economics is happy with *intrapersonal* (unit) comparisons, but often sceptical of *interpersonal* (level or unit) comparisons – apparently due to the view that the *content* of IPUC statements is evaluative, rather than descriptive (and that it therefore has no place in “science”).
   a. Backing up the claim that intra- but not inter-personal comparisons are descriptive matters: the standard account of intra-personal comparisons, via the preference-satisfaction theory of well-being and EU theory.
   b. Responses to this:
      i. Refrain from making IPUCs, even in normative economics (the Paretian programme);
      ii. Argue that IPUCs can be given a descriptive basis after all (the “extended preferences” programme);
      iii. Accept that normative economics requires making value judgments.

2) The extended-preferences programme
   a. Harsanyi attempted to argue that actually a preference-satisfaction theory of well-being *can* ground IPUCs, once one considers “extended preferences”, i.e. individuals’ preferences for *being individual i in possible world A over being j in world B*.
   b. But this “extended-preferences” approach founders on the fact that different individuals will have different extended-preference orderings.
   c. Adler’s “supervaluationist” rescue attempt leads to massive incomparability.

3) A theory of IPUCs
   a. Instead of starting from an ordering of lotteries in terms of *preferredness by a given individual*, start from an ordering of *centred* lotteries in terms of *betterness for the individual concerned*.
   b. Run the standard representations of decision theory on this ordering.
   c. The result: an assignment of (*utility*) numbers to *centred* worlds that is unique up to a *single* positive affine transformation. We now have determinate IPUCs.

4) Evaluative or descriptive?
   a. On this theory, there is a clear sense in which both interpersonal (both level- and unit-) comparisons are evaluative matters: both are statements about the *betterness-for-the-individual* ordering of centred worlds.
   b. But the same remark applies equally to *intrapersonal* comparisons.
   c. Relative to a particular substantive theory of well-being, we may be able to recover a derivative sense in which the ‘content’ of comparisons of a given sort is descriptive (given that background assumption, the comparison-statement in question is *equivalent to some purely descriptive statement*).

5) Evaluation, description and the preference-satisfaction theory of well-being
   a. To be at all plausible *qua* theory of well-being, a preference-satisfaction theory needs to ‘launder’ preferences somehow – by appeal either to procedural, or to substantive, rationality.
   b. But appealing to substantive rationality amounts to abandoning preference-satisfaction theory of well-being.
c. And appeal to procedural rationality (whatever else it does or does not do) will not ground IPUCs, because of the non-uniqueness problem (as above).
d. So the preference-satisfaction theory indeed cannot give IPUCs descriptive content, even in our derivative sense.

6) Evaluation, description and hedonism
   a. A descriptive matter of fact as to how many hedons a given centred world possesses?
   b. This is an illusion. The hedon scale has to be fixed somehow – merely introducing the word ‘hedon’ or talking of ‘quantities of pleasure’ will not do it – and (at both the ordinal and cardinal level of uniqueness) this scale-fixing is based on evaluation.
      i. Analogies: the size of a cube; the Richter scale
   c. So, given hedonism, intra-personal utility comparisons remain evaluative matters even in our derivative sense.
   d. Once the intrapersonal scale has been fixed, however, purely descriptive facts will suffice to extend it to include inter-personal comparisons.

7) Evaluation, description and objective lists: The story here exactly parallels that for hedonism.

8) Summary and conclusions
   a. Since both intra- and inter-personal wellbeing comparisons are ultimately based on assessments of goodness-for-the-individual, both are fundamentally evaluative. But there could in principle be a derivative (substantive-theory-dependent) sense in which they are descriptive.
   b. Relative to the preference-satisfaction theory of well-being, the economists’ assertion that intra- but not inter-personal comparisons are purely descriptive is correct.
   c. But relative to a hedonist or objective-list theory of well-being, if anything the reverse is true.
   d. This is of some interest to the understanding of the latter two theories. The ambition to pursue normative economics in a value-free manner is (however) hopeless anyway.